

## University of Dundee

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## **Optional assessment submission within Masters-level learning: teachers' perceptions**

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## Abstract

As a result of the report Teaching Scotland's Future (Donaldson, 2010), Scottish Government made available £1.7million for projects that would facilitate an increase in Masters-level learning for teachers (Scottish Government, 2013). One of the projects involved teachers, from a single local authority in Scotland, **undertaking a 30 credit module at Masters-level and a distinct element of this project was that participants had the choice to submit** the assignment at Masters-level.

Two group interviews were conducted with a non-probability volunteer sample taken from the total project group (n= 30). The two research groups comprised of either students **who submitted (n= 6), or chose not to submit (n= 6)**. Resulting data was then analysed taking into account Evans' (2014) conceptualised model of professionalism and professional development to determine how attitudinal components relate to the participants' assessment submission decision. The study concludes by suggesting that a deeper understanding of motivation of teachers is essential when planning such CPD/PL programmes.

**Keywords:** continuing professional development; professional learning; higher education; masters-level study; self-efficacy; optional submission.

## Introduction

Undertaking professional development (PD) and learning (which within education in Scotland is termed Career-Long Professional Learning or CLPL) can be challenging for any individual. When coupled with working in an educational setting with demanding workloads and changing policy contexts, study at Masters-level (M-level) may add additional pressure (Gibson et al., 2017) through the requirement to submit a formal assignment. The formal element to PD may be a barrier to engagement and was considered in the highly significant review of Scottish teacher education titled Teaching Scotland's Future (TSF).

In England the aim of developing teachers-as-researchers, via M-level study, has been commonplace since the late 1990s, including within initial teacher training programmes (Gray, 2013). However it is important to note that the funded Masters in Teaching and Learning programme in England was aborted in 2011 (Christie et al., 2012). At an international level some education systems require teachers to be educated to Masters-level whereas others do not (Scheerens et al., 2010). Clearly this depends on statutory regulation or governmental policy but the issues of teacher motivation, self-efficacy and engagement with accredited professional development is also of interest to the wider educational community. Although not a formal requirement, M-level study is now becoming more common within Scottish initial teacher education courses with some institutions offering this. Furthermore there is now an expectation that practising Scottish teachers will engage with Masters-level *learning* as part of their career-long professional learning (Donaldson, 2010). Therefore the situation in Scottish education could be described as evolving and so presents a valuable context for study. This article explores the experience of a cohort of Scottish teachers who undertook Masters-level learning and who were given the option to either submit a Masters-level assignment or simply engage with the course content and access Masters-level learning.

### *Context for the study*

The study was carried out in Scotland following the publication of TSF which included 50 recommendations relating to teacher education across the continuum of a teacher's career life. According to Kennedy and Doherty (2012) the TSF report was received with overwhelming positivity 'with the Scottish Government accepting either in full, in principle or in part, each of the recommendations' (p.836). Included within the recommendations was one that focussed on the issue of teachers engaging with Masters-level learning:

a greater range of CPD should be formally accredited. Masters-level credits should be built into initial teacher education qualifications, induction year activities and CPD beyond the induction year... (Donaldson, 2010, p.99)

As a result of this recommendation Scottish Government made funds available for teacher continuing professional development (CPD). As part of a major project, between 2013 and 2014, a fund of £1.7m was made available for CPD and Masters-level learning (Scottish Government, 2013) with the explicit aim of increasing Masters-level learning for teachers. In total 19 projects were funded and one of these involved collaboration between a single university and several local authorities with the aim of developing a confidence in, and culture of, Masters-level learning amongst teachers. This allowed the teachers to participate in a 30 credit taught module with the option to continue studies at Masters-level later if they decided to do so (without additional funding). Part of the rationale for this project was that once teachers engaged with Masters-level learning **they might then opt to continue with M-level study**. Although TSF called for more formally accredited CPD at Masters-level, a distinct element of

this specific project was that the participants **could engage with the learning opportunities knowing there was no requirement to submit an assignment**. This was based on the reasoning that the removal of a formal assessment may reduce pressure and may allow participants to engage in deeper learning, **a view informed by research linking test anxiety with lower academic performance (Chapell et al., 2005)**.

The research study focused on a group of students undertaking an M-level module, covering Reflective Practice, at a single Scottish university. Teaching was delivered through a blended model, including online materials and three face-to-face workshops led by tutors, and culminated with students opting whether or not to submit a final 5000 word assignment (consistent with all other 30 credit modules of the University's MEd pathway) and an action plan for their own professional development.

### ***Theoretical components of professional development***

Theoretical models can be utilised to understand the nature of professional development and this often followed projects or investigations (e.g. Adey, 2004; Butler and Schnellert, 2012; Beauchamp et al., 2015). In many cases professional development theory focusses on practical issues (Boyd, 2005) with resultant models reflecting this and may be overly simplistic. However in contrast to this it has been argued that professional development and learning involves a variety of complex or even nuanced factors so models should reflect this reality (Evans, 2002). Evans argues that the use of descriptive, or explanatory, models of professional development succeed in 'widen[ing] the knowledge base, certainly; but they do not necessarily *deepen* it.' (Evans, 2014: , p.182). This concept of achieving a deeper understanding of professional development or teacher learning is mirrored elsewhere with a systematic review of literature (Opfer and Pedder, 2011), conducted for the Teacher Development Agency in England, suggesting that **models of teacher development and learning too often rely** on simple concepts:

...the majority of writings on the topic continue to focus on specific activities, processes, or programs in isolation from the complex teaching and learning environments in which teachers live.

(p.377)

Building on this analysis there appears to be a desire to analyse professional development and learning by simply focussing of the 'process-product' approach. This element will be considered during the current research study, but alongside other key elements and themes identified during the study. There is clearly a complex interrelationship between these elements and themes, and the presence of what **are** termed 'subsystems' (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). **Within the current study the participants' perceptions will have been influenced by their own students, tutors, colleagues, managers and support staff**. Unfortunately, despite recognition that the field of teaching and learning involves such complex interlinked relationships, the manner in which PD is analysed is often overly simplistic, not reflecting this 'complexity' (Putnam and Borko, 2000). Therefore, the researchers in this study opted to utilise a model of PD which goes beyond this common 'process-product' approach to analyse the factors that influence the participating teachers and their desire to engage with accredited Masters-level PD. The greater sophistication of the Evans' model led to it being chosen to provide an analysis of the componential nature of PD for this study. **Evans uses the term *componential* to illustrate how the wider concept of professional development is synthesised from smaller components and sub-components**.

In addition, the main focus of the current study is to explore the factors (including behavioural, intellectual and attitudinal) that influence how and why teachers engaged in this professional learning experience and so the Evans (2014) componential structure model (p.190) of professional development has been selected (Figure 1) for analysis purposes. This model is based on an the antecedent analysis of the key components of professionalism, which Evans argues is inextricably intertwined with PD and that the ‘two are inseparable’ (Evans, 2015: , p.7). This model of PD includes three key components (behaviour, intellect and attitude) along with 11 sub-components. For the current research study, this model is used to investigate the participants’ perception of ‘what’ professional development is and ‘how’ it occurs within the framework of the current project.

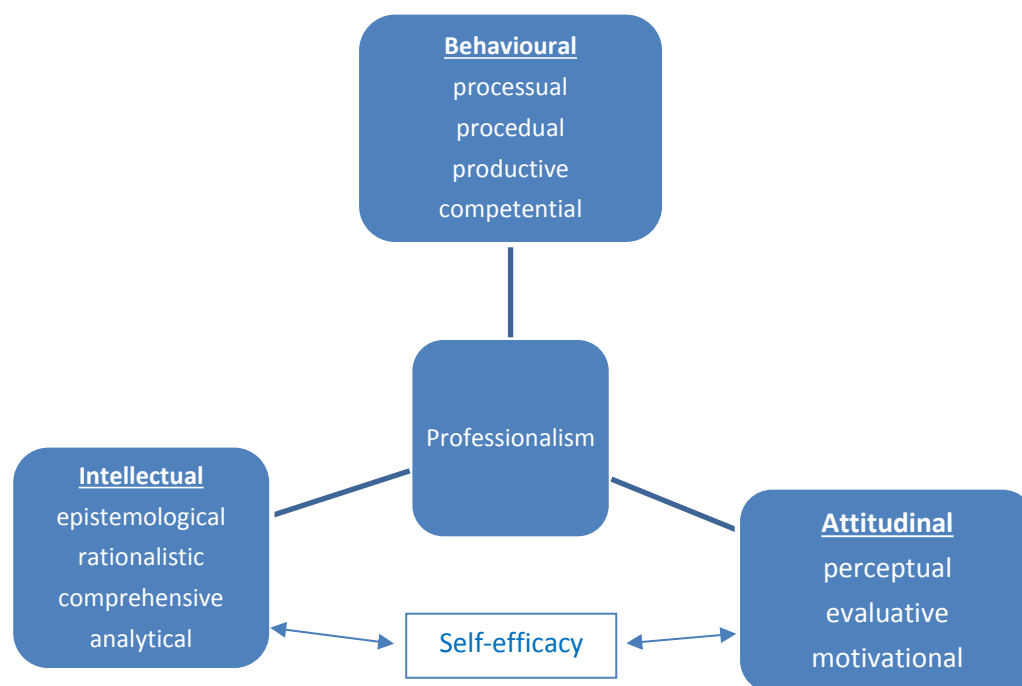


Figure 1: Componential model of professional development adapted from Evans (2014) including main areas of importance for self-efficacy

### ***Application of theoretical lens to current study***

This study aimed to explore the complex relationship between ‘how’ and ‘why’ these individuals engaged with M-level study opportunities and whether or not they chose to submit the assignment. It was thought that this decision would also be influenced by participants’ pre-existing beliefs so the psychological theory of self-efficacy would be significant.

### ***Motivational factors***

It has been well documented that, in typical situations, individuals will avoid or lack engagement if they deem a task as low value or if their self-perception is a lack of competence (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). This lack of belief will negatively influence a learner’s self-regulation of motivation (Bandura, 1997). In the early 1970s, Deci (1971) categorised motivation into two distinct types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Individuals who are extrinsically motivated to complete tasks do so as a result of external coercion, such as pressure or obtaining

a reward, often deemed as the carrot or stick method (Amabile, 1998; Pink, 2011). Whilst extrinsic rewards can boost motivation, this method of managing motivation is often deemed as short-lived (Pink, 2011). Whereas, those who are intrinsically motivated are proactive and will engage in a task they value with interest and excitement without the need for external rewards (Ryan and Deci, 2000a; Prat-Sala and Redford, 2010); these individuals possess 'the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore and to learn' (Ryan and Deci, 2000a: , p.70). However it is also worth noting, for individuals who are intrinsically motivated, tangible rewards may ultimately undermine the internal motivation (Deci et al., 2001). Furthermore, research has also demonstrated that intrinsic motivation can be weakened by the addition of imposed deadlines and imposed goals (Ryan and Deci, 2000b).

Motivation and learning have a reciprocal relationship and motivation is deemed a key driver in overcoming challenge and achieving a high degree of performance. Similar to self-efficacy, individuals with a lower degree of intrinsic motivation are more likely to demonstrate superficial involvement with perceived problems (Ruscio et al., 1998). Motivation can also determine not only the level of an individual's performance but also, specifically within education, what they choose to learn (Kao et al., 2011). **Applying this theory of intrinsic motivation to learners it has been suggested that motivation is a large contributor toward student achievement** (Froiland and Worrell, 2016).

### *Self-Efficacy*

As the analysis in this study will be framed within the Evans' componential model (Figure 1), considering behavioural, motivational and intellectual elements, it is clear that the individual's sense of self, situated within a wider social context, is important. Within the componential model the attitudinal sub-components include perceptual, evaluative and motivational change. The interface between a student's cognitive development (which is represented in the Evans' model by the intellectual components) and intrinsic motivation (represented as attitudinal components in the Evans' model) is emphasised by the notion of self-efficacy (Shea and Bidjerano, 2010: , p.1723) and this is represented in the adapted componential model (Figure 1). An individual's perceived self-efficacy refers to the 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments' (Bandura, 1997: , p.3). The impetus to act will be minimal if individuals do not believe their actions will result in the desired outcomes; the expectation of inefficacious students to undertake challenging study tasks is therefore reduced (Zimmerman, 2000). Zimmerman (2000) also emphasizes that personal qualities (for example, psychological and physical characteristics) are not a focus in measures of self-efficacy. Relating this back to professional development there are four methods that can lead to a development of self-efficacy and of these 'mastery experience' or the ability to enable 'the person to succeed in attainable but increasingly challenging performances' has the strongest influence (McAlister et al., 2008) and this has clear implications for the current study.

Whilst efficacious beliefs have **been** shown to influence performance attainment, attainment does not necessarily produce an increase in personal efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), this self-judgment, for example the measure of effort, perseverance and resilience when faced with challenges, will impact people's behaviour. Thus, central to the concept of self-efficacy is a degree of self-analysis where learners will estimate their degree of capability to carry out the demands of the study requirements and to what extent they will be successful in executing the task (Shea and Bidjerano, 2010). In the current context this has relevance as submitting the



assignment would result in the tangible outcome which could be regarded as a success, or failure, in the form of a pass or fail grade against the predefined assessment criteria. **However, it could also be argued that undertaking the assignment may nurture, or deepen, professional reflection, which could in turn lead to development of intrinsic motivation.**

As learning often pushes a student's cognitive and social boundaries, self-efficacy is paramount in educational settings (Klassen and Usher, 2010) where its relationship with academic outcomes has been shown to be strong (Multon et al., 1991). The past few decades have seen several studies conducted which demonstrates that a student's level of academic motivation and achievement has been determined by their self-efficacious behaviour (e.g. Klassen and Usher, 2010; Shea and Bidjerano, 2010). Furthermore, learners who have been deemed to possess a high level of self-efficacy (for example in reading and writing) demonstrate a deep and strategic approach (such as monitoring and organising) to their studies (Prat-Sala and Redford, 2010). In turn, it is proposed that this may lead to greater desire to engage with formalised assessment. Because evidence of previous research suggests that self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation are essential for learner achievement, it is proposed that these concepts are crucial in determining the participants' decision in submission of an assignment for formal accreditation. However, it could be argued that there is an implicit assumption, within education, that teachers and educators are, by their nature, self-motivated. This project attempted to investigate this, and associated influential factors.

## **Research Questions**

**As a result of the literature review the following key research questions were developed:**

**RQ1. What were the general views of this cohort of Masters-level study during this project?**

**RQ2. What factors influenced the decision to submit the assignment, or not, following study during this project?**

**RQ3. How did the specific decision to submit the assignment influence learning experience during this project?**

## **Research methods (Figure 2)**

The data used in this research project was derived from a small scale qualitative study which employed a broadly inductive and interpretivist approach. This research project utilised group interviews to assess the experiences and views of the participants from two distinct groups, each containing 6 participants, from a wider cohort of 30 potential participants. The group interview technique was chosen as this is suitable for constructing new knowledge and gauging opinion (Gibbs, 2012). The additional advantage of this method was that it allowed for several individuals to participate at the same time thus reducing practical costs (e.g. time) and diminishing the power imbalance between researcher and participant that may exist in an individual interview allowing for greater authenticity of response (Gibbs, 2012). The data collection process for each group was administered separately, in different rooms, but conducted simultaneously. Each interview was facilitated by one of two researchers from a single Scottish University with the key focus being a comparison of why participants in the first group elected to submit to gain Masters-level credits, whereas those the in second group chose not to submit. Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' host University and all participants provided informed consent.



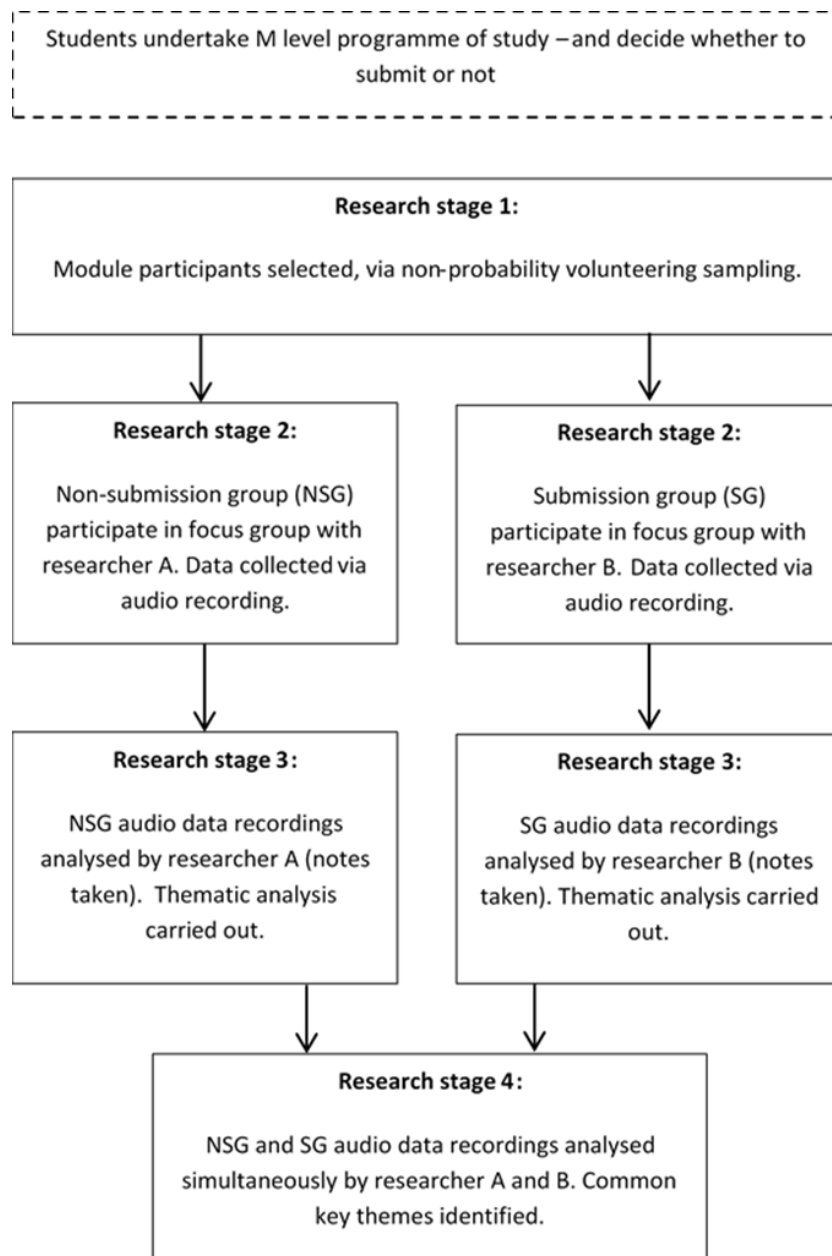


Figure 2: Process flow diagram for data collection and analysis research method

### ***Participant Selection***

The participants in this study were selected from 30 teachers who engaged in the module, all of whom worked within one Scottish local authority. Due to the nature of the target group the only option available was by way of non-probability volunteer sampling (Cohen et al., 2007: , p.160). The sample size in each of the groups (n=6) was dictated by the respondents offering to take part in the study having been approached by the local authority link officer. Given the small sample size, and specific nature of the module, single local authority involved, the researchers acknowledged, at the design stage, that opportunities for generalisation would be limited.

### ***Data Sources***

The responses to the research questions were obtained via two semi-structured group interviews. The first group (submission group or SG) was comprised entirely of those who chose to submit an assignment at Masters-level and the second group (non-submission group or NSG) comprised solely of participants who chose not to submit at Masters-level. In general, both groups were asked the same key questions, with the exception of a supplementary question which was determined as a result of their submission/non-submission choice. The group interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were audio recorded throughout. It is important to note that the participants were interviewed at the end of their studies but prior to any assessments results being confirmed to them. This was planned so that the results of the assessment (for the SG) did not influence the participant's perceptions.

### ***Data collection (Figure 2)***

Two separate group discussions were led, each one independently, by one of the two researchers. One of the researchers had also been a tutor on the programme for the current cohort and the other was not known to the participants. The potential for reliability of data, due to one tutor's involvement, meant this tutor was allocated to interview the submission group. It was thought that the non-submission group may provide more authentic responses if interviewed by someone not previously known to them. Open-ended, prompt questions were prepared by the researchers and used with both groups and then supplemented during discussions by controlled non-directive probing (Sarantakos, 2012). Guidance from Wellington (2015) was utilised with the question design with questions being kept simple, non-ambiguous, **but not leading or loaded**. Colleagues from the researchers' home academic institution 'sense checked' the questions before the data collection stage.

A key advantage was that both the interviewers knew the topic, as they had both worked on the programme of study previously, and the focus of the interview questions was discussed in advance, this allowed them to clarify misunderstandings. However, this increased the potential for leading respondents in a particular direction; this was also a consideration during the data analysis phase conducted later. The researchers recognize that the scale of this study is limited and this would have implications when trying to come to any **generalizable** conclusions.

The prompt questions used in the interviews were as follows (with how they related to the RQs in brackets):

- How did you feel about returning to/undertaking Masters-level study? (RQ1)
- What sort of impact did the workshops/taught sessions have? (RQ1 and RQ2)
- How did you engage with the online resources? (RQ1 and RQ2)
- What factors influenced you to submit or not? (RQ2)

The following final question was posed to the NSG participants only:

- Do you now wish you had submitted for accreditation, and if so why? (RQ3)

The following two questions were posed to the SG participants only:

- Did you always think you would submit, and was there time when you did not think you would submit, if so why? (RQ3)
- What was more important to you about this module the fact that it was at Masters-level or the fact you could achieve masters-credit, and why? (RQ3)

### ***Data analysis (Figure 2)***

The two separate group interview audio recordings were reviewed by both researchers independently, to mitigate against researcher subjectivity. It was felt that **by** immediately transcribing the interviews, and working from just the transcribed data, the richness and nuance within any discussion **might** be lost. Instead the addition of a less formalised familiarisation stage abstracting data from the recording was utilised which the researchers felt would provide an opportunity to delineate meaning and avoid the loss aspects such as emotional responses (Sarantakos, 2012). The researcher who had facilitated the group discussion analysed their own group's recording and made summary notes to capture key themes and this facilitated the subsequent stage of analysis.

An important consideration when analysing results of interviews is how the analysis of transcription will be accurately verified (Cohen et al., 2007). It was decided in advance that the final collaborative review stage, carried out by both researchers, would act as a verification exercise which attempted to mitigate this potential limitation. The researchers then listened to both the audio recordings a second time but this time together and, using the first stage notes, discussed the emergent themes in an attempt to validate initial thoughts and identify potentially invalid or unreliable data (for example due to leading questioning).

The researchers then summarised the analysis of both group interviews to identify the main themes. The researchers were aware that themes should not be pre-constructed and are developed, and reformed during the analysis process (Sarantakos, 2012: , p.380). The authors did not employ a formalised coding structure, such as is recommended with applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011), as it was thought this would limit the ability to infer meaning from the different respondents, especially as terminology may differ between individuals. In line with guidance the analysis followed a mainly inductive process, developing from the original research questions, allowing for the themes to emerge (Gibbs, 2012).

These final thematic summaries were then discussed by the researchers and the four key common themes defined as:

- Structure and delivery of the module (divided into three sub-themes: Online learning, Face-to-face workshops, and Ability to access learning)
- Content of the module (subject matter)
- Perceptions of purpose of Masters-level study – product or process?
- Attitude to Masters-level study

### **Findings and analysis**

The data from the group discussions provided details of how students engaged with the module and ultimately how this influenced their decision to submit the assignment or not. This section explores the four main themes drawn from the focus group interviews in relation to the participants' perspective. As the entire transcripts could not be reproduced illustrative examples are included which reflected the general themes. **After individual analysis of the data (stage 3) the simultaneous analysis of data by both researchers (at stage 4) was intended to cross-check these themes (figure 2). The example quotes were then consensually selected following discussions between both researchers. Following the analysis the most striking**

feature of the data is the markedly different experiences and views offered by the two different groups.

## ***1. Structure and delivery of module***

The first theme to emerge from the data was the practical issues of structure and delivery of the module. This was the broadest of the themes and included issues such as access to, and presentation of, the VLE and taught workshop sessions and the way in which learning was facilitated. Therefore, three sub-themes were identified as: the online nature of the module, the face-to-face workshops and ability to independently access learning.

### ***1.1 Online Learning***

The online nature of the module being studied was identified as being an important factor for some of the participants. The integration of offline workshop-based contact combined with online interactive learning has shown to be a promising approach that facilitates professional development (Shea and Bidjerano, 2010). The characteristics of blended learning provide participants with an element of flexibility which enables them to combine their studies, professional roles and family commitments (Gerbic, 2011; George-Walker and Keeffe, 2010). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) go on to suggest how a blended learning environment increases **the learner's** control and independence of their study along with augmenting the learner's responsibilities due to its autonomous nature. Despite these advantages the participants in the NSG found the virtual nature of the course problematic.

I think it was assumed, in terms of the wiki pages that we'd all used something like that before... I found that a whole new learning process and that made me more confused.  
(NSG participant)

**Intuitively, as the use of technology increases and becomes more embedded in our day-to-day lives there is a tendency for some to assume a level of competency not achieved by others, illustrated by the digital native and immigrants dichotomy (Margaryan et al., 2011).** However as online learning becomes more commonplace, a student's potential lack of knowledge, experience or self-belief with technology should to be accounted for, particularly for students who are just beginning their blended learning process. In alternative research into teacher motivation for engaging with online professional development (Kao et al., 2011), it has been shown that a teacher's motivation positively correlates toward online learning when internet self-efficacy is strongly demonstrated.

Applying this to the current study this may indicate that the NSG lacked sufficient self-efficacy relating to digital technology. Members of the non-submission group (NSG) specifically highlighted some barriers to utilising technological tools for learning purposes:

I think the online nature of it, personally for me, I'd prefer to be in a classroom with somebody there and working through something... I found that [online] side of it a bit more difficult to cope with. (NSG participant)

The above comments reflect the notion that 'the absence of traditional and familiar classroom conventions may result in additional uncertainty' (Shea and Bidjerano, 2010: , p.1727). Whereas a comment made by the submission group (SG) seemed to identify how the online nature of this module was beneficial:

I really rated the online [VLE facility], I got a lot from [it]... I really liked that there was a synopsis of each kind of area that you could go on and have a look at in terms of the reading... the online materials were really very good'. (SG participant)

These comments appear consistent with Kao, Wu and Tsai's (2011) findings which revealed that a key factor in increased motivation is the participant's self-belief, particularly in relation to engagement with a web-based professional development tool. The presence of this sub-theme may also demonstrate that self-efficacy is one component of 'a larger construct of online learner self-regulation' (Shea and Bidjerano, 2010: , p.1727).

### *1.2 Face-to-face workshops*

The face-to-face workshops generated mixed responses and it is important to note that the first workshop (introducing the module) was deliberately structured or scaffolded. One NSG participant explained how the provision of 'tasks' for the next stage of learning helped:

After the first session... we were quite buzzing because there were specific things that we were sent away to do this and do this and ... we had specific tasks and it all seemed very doable and we had something physical to go away and complete. (NSG participant)

This comment may suggest a preference (with this participant) for a formalised structured approach to learning and study. The addition of a more structured initial session, designed to provide a gentle start to the module, may then have impacted negatively as learning opportunities became less structured. This may link to the **student's experience** and confidence, this time relating to autonomous learning. In direct contrast some comments from the SG illustrated that the workshops were valued as they simply introduced ideas or concepts, which the participants then built on later.

...it [the workshop and reading] made a link, then my follow-on reading linked so I understood, but at the time there was confusion but I suppose that's learning for you but through that process it helped to understand more about reflection. (SG participant)

At the time of the workshop there was confusion but it made sense later. (SG participant)

These comments also suggest that the SG saw the workshops as part of a bigger learning process or cycle and in contrast the NSG seemed to focus on outputs or the planned tasks.

Although some responses showed a stark contrast between the groups, elsewhere there was evidence of agreement. Participants from both groups expressed similar views about one particular workshop:

I think that it [workshop] was pitched at an undergraduate level, I would have like to have looked at that [professionalism] at a much deeper level [...] I would have like to have looked at professionalism in a classroom setting rather than as outwardly behaviours. (SG participant)

It was certainly a course [workshop] that spent a lot of time about what is professionalism and I think a lot of people in the room, myself included, thought the

way... that it is pitched is the way you would perhaps pitch at BEd [undergraduate] level. (NSG participant)

Although these comments from each participant group were similar the way they responded to the situation was markedly different. The NSG identified the issue with the 'pitch' of the workshop but chose not to act proactively, which may be linked to levels of self-efficacy. These comments also suggest that the ability to 'pitch' Masters-level learning, especially in a taught or guided session, should be an important consideration for teaching staff. Although not a focus of this study the issue of perceived quality of provision at Masters-level should not be ignored.

In addition to the workshops, the participants were also made aware that tutor support was available on a one-to-one basis beyond the twilight sessions. From the interview discussion with the NSG, the researchers found no evidence that the participants had actively sought out or pursued this option. In contrast, members of the SG found this inclusion supportive, evident from the following comment:

I have to say that the support, when you ask for support, has been fantastic. The tutors are very open and approachable. (SG participant)

This final point may again reflect the different attitudinal approaches, and experience and confidence of the SG participants over that of the NSG participants. The students displaying greater self-efficacy may give less consideration of the delivery method, compared to those who preferred face-to-face teaching and learning which in turn may have impacted on decision to submit the assignment.

### *1.3 Ability to access learning*

This theme relates to the perceptions of structure and support within the module; throughout the discussion several participants expressed reservations about this aspect. There was a clear distinction with the NSG group making several comments about the desire for greater guidance and even instruction of what to do and when. Meanwhile this element was not referenced at all by the SG suggesting they had not expected or needed this form of structure. For example, some of the comments from the NSG included:

I get what [another participant] says about Masters-level being more open but for module one I feel it needs to be more structured and guided. (NSG participant)

I think I had bitten off more than I can chew and was perhaps needing that little bit more guidance and steps through the process and maybe at Masters-level that's not what happens. (NSG participant)

I don't know, maybe we needed a bit more of, what did we say? Hand-holding? And that's not what Masters' study is about but it was what the BEd course was about and that's all I've got to compare it to. (NSG participant)

It is possible that the ability to access learning was dependent on intellectual differences between the two groups, which is one of the key components of the Evans model (2014). Overall, although there were some criticisms over the quality of provision (i.e. that some workshop sessions did not always help the students) the SG participants appeared to demonstrate a greater desire and ability to overcome the challenges of Masters-level study.

This suggests that issues relating to confidence, and resultant impact of self-efficacy, were a key factor within the perceptions of structure and delivery of module.

## ***2. Content of the module (subject matter)***

Another example of a marked difference between the two groups related to perceptions of the module content. The SG made comments in relation to the content being part of a holistic learning process and recognised the relevance to their overall development. Interestingly they also commented on how the formal study process, including reading and writing at Masters-level, enhanced their understanding of the links between theory and practice:

I think if someone was to ask me about reflection or professionalism now, I have a completely different understanding, and I thought I knew what it meant when I started but I didn't so I've got a totally different understanding now. (SG participant)

I think I'm a better teacher because of it, I've developed myself as a teacher, as a professional, I've learnt quite a lot about myself by reflecting and I think it's impacted on my practice. (SG participant)

Apparently this was not the case for the NSG as the comments focused far more on the links between the teaching materials and the end product or output, specifically the written assignment, rather than the relationship between theory and practice:

I just didn't see the link between the module materials and the task, the written task, I just couldn't see the link. (NSG participant)

When I think back to my studies I did a few years ago, at the start of each module we got the assignment and then they broke it down... it really helped me with the actual task... as these sessions [Masters study] went on I didn't see how that would help me submit the assignment. (NSG participant)

The second comment, in particular, appears to show a clear distinction between the two groups and understanding of the importance of academic reading, engagement with literature (to inform academic writing) and reflexive practice. These findings also suggest that the SG took personal responsibility for this process and identified where, and how, they needed to put this in to act independently. One explanation for this is that the prior knowledge, or experiences, of different participants influenced their ability to perceive and therefore engage with the module and the importance of student perception also featured in the next key theme.

## ***3. Perceptions of purpose of Masters-level study – product or process?***

This third theme mirrors the earlier ones suggesting a clear difference between the two groups; the SG focussed on the process of learning and development, whereas the NSG had a tendency to focus on the outcomes or end-product. For example:

I feel that I needed to go through the whole process [the study and the assignment] to get the most out of the opportunity. (SG participant)

For me, it was more the fact that it was an engagement of study at that level, something that I know I could enjoy and it would be challenging and it would kind of help my own personal growth and reflections as a professional. (SG participant)



...there were specific things that we were sent away to do ... we had specific tasks ... and we had something physical to go away and complete. (NSG participant)

The fundamental difference between participants' views may have reflected their underlying ideological view of education. Returning to the Evans' model of professional development this would be represented by the behavioural components, namely the sub-component representing 'productive' development (Evans, 2014). Building on the notion of 'product' focussed learning it was noted that throughout the commentary from the NSG participants, a large proportion of the discussion focussed on the assignment and the emphasis they placed on this from the outset, as opposed to their overall intellectual or attitudinal development. The following comment illustrates this:

I think the pressure of failing as well, you know the thought of failing, it was easier to not [submit]. (NSG participant)

This is notable as the participant clearly felt it would be worse to submit and not pass than not submit at all despite there being no tangible difference in the outcome. Effectively this individual was rejecting the value of 'learning for learning sake'. Another explanation is that the NSG group may have been anticipating the negative impact on their confidence if they had submitted and failed. Again within this general theme there are clear links here to participant confidence, competence and resilience even in challenging circumstances. One participant went on to outline a feeling of regret at having not submitted:

You feel kind of cheated in a way, the fact that you have actually engaged, you've done all the work and done the action plan, you've done the reflection, you've done the reading, if only we had got ourselves together to write the essay we'd have something to show for it at the end. (NSG participant)

This may have been an attempt to absolve themselves from responsibility from not submitting or justify their approach within the research group (who were their peers). **If this is the case it has implications for the theory of self-efficacy but also form and level of teacher motivation, which also links to attitude which was the focus of the next theme.**

#### ***4. Attitude to Masters-level study***

The final theme focused on attitudinal factors and the beliefs of participants about their own personal achievement and engagement with Masters-level study. Within Higher Education the issue of what construes Masters-level learning is often debated and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland have adopted the term 'Mastersness' and outline certain key facets (QAA Scotland, 2016). These include, amongst others, 'depth' and 'complexity' but also 'autonomy' suggesting learners at this level take 'responsibility for own learning in terms of self-organisation, motivation, location and acquisition of knowledge' (QAA Scotland, 2016: , no page).

The data from the current study suggested that the term 'Masters', and study at this level, was problematic for some participants. This resulted in feelings of apprehension and anxiety for some of the participants within the NSG:

The term Masters, for me, just has a scary thought straight away... you mention that "I'm engaging in a Masters' module" people are like "Oh you must be really clever" and I'm thinking, 'well no, I'm not!' So straight away I was really anxious about what was going to be expected and the level that we would be working. (NSG participant)

The anticipation of what was to come at that level when you've not been involved in that level of study before and just thinking about it being a Masters-level module was quite scary in itself. (NSG participant)

The use of terms such as 'scary' ('fear' was also used) correlate with literature which suggest that learner's physiological and emotional reactions, for example, stress, are often at the root of an inefficacious judgement (Klassen and Usher, 2010; Zimmerman, 2000). It has also been suggested that stress can be reduced by self-efficacious individuals who are able to improve their emotional wellbeing by relabelling emotions such as 'fear' as 'excitement' (McAlister et al., 2008). This was the case for the SG participants who appeared to embrace challenge, and although demonstrating a degree of nervousness this was also mixed with a level of excitement.

[It was] quite exciting to carry on with things that you have either done in the past or just engaging with the University in that kind of study again and it's a great opportunity to have it all funded for you. (SG participant)

For me it was more the fact that it was an engagement of study at that level [Masters], something that I knew I could enjoy and it would be challenging and it would kind of help my own personal growth and reflections as a professional. (SG participant)

It is possible that the intrinsic engagement and achievement was being viewed as a reward by the SG. It has been suggested that the success of such reward systems relies on participants having a degree of interest (Schunk, 1991). Returning to the componential model (2014) this developmental experience would be clearly located in the attitudinal component.

A notable observation within this theme was the apparently contradictory views held by some of the NSG. As identified earlier they had objected to the lack of academic rigour in a particular session but then, as shown by the quotes above, this seemed at odds with their own approach to engagement with M-level learning. This possibly reflected their belief that the *tutors* should be operating at this higher level, demonstrating mastery, but the *students* themselves should, or could not. The most important method that can lead to a development of self-efficacy is 'mastery experience' (McAlister et al., 2008) and it seems this had an important influencing factor for the SG. **This difference in expectation also highlights that those leading the learning have responsibility for understanding the learners, which is a valuable insight for future. Earlier discussion considered that a lack of a written submission allows the learner space or freedom to develop a deeper engagement or understanding. However this conclusion is potentially contradictory as the SG, who were demonstrating greater self-efficacy should, by definition, not desire or require the freedom of choice to submit.**

Returning to positive perceptions of the project and submission at M-level one participant from the SG group summarised the general attitude of this group that, although challenging, the engagement with the module and submission of the assignment had long term benefits:

I've taken a variety of positives out of it, I think, on a very basic level, the perseverance when the going got really tough and trying to manage everything... how I can move myself forward in my practice because, it's maybe not changed my thinking but... I think I feel a lot more confident in that particular area. (SG participant)

This is important as it may suggest the potential of the participants to ‘transfer’ self-efficacy and motivation (Schunk, 1991) to other professional situations, and have an impact on them as teachers.

## **Conclusion and implications for future**

This study addressed the following RQs:

RQ1. What were the general views of this cohort of Masters-level study during this project?

RQ2. What factors influenced the decision to submit the assignment, or not, following study during this project?

RQ3. How did the specific decision to submit the assignment influence learning experience during this project?

RQ1 sought to explore this cohort’s views of M-level study. Effective adult learners should, it has been argued, have an independent self-concept and be internally motivated to learn (Knowles et al., 2014). The SG appeared to have enjoyed a more positive experience whereas the NSG apparently did not enjoy, or value, the process of learning at Masters-level as much. This may have been a result of their perceptions of education and learning at this level, or the very nature of adult learning and an inability to view this differently to how they would themselves teach children (Knowles, 1970).

The SG demonstrated proactive engagement with the module and seemed to view being challenged as an opportunity, whereas the NSG were more anxious, and demonstrated a lack of confidence in their own ability to overcome preconceptions. Despite this, there was not really one ‘catch all’ explanation or criteria for why someone submitted or not. The particular circumstances were relatively distinct to each participant but the issues of personal confidence, motivation and more specifically self-efficacy were clear throughout this study. Of course it is important to point out that these findings may simply correlate with certain personal characteristics (relating to self-efficacy or motivation) and not be causal but this should not detract from the value of analysing the two groups to aid understanding of this form of professional development for teachers.

Referring to Evans’ (2014) componential structure model of professional development, the NSG seemed to believe that the learning would, or *should*, concentrate on the behavioural development aspect (processual, procedural, productive and componential change) of their practice. Mainly this referred to the completion of the module and the actual assignment (i.e. the product element). The SG, although possibly not overtly aware, were able to acknowledge their engagement with attitudinal (perceptual, evaluative and motivational change) and intellectual (epistemological, rationalistic, comprehensive and analytical change) development. In cases where the SG considered practical elements, such as the module content, they also referenced the impact on themselves intrinsically, for example, they referenced the ability to reflect and the impact this had on practice. This suggests they saw M-level study as impacting on both the attitudinal and behavioural components but critically the evaluative change component was also relevant to them. This also suggests a higher degree of self-efficacious behaviour within the SG.

RQ2 and RQ3 aimed to explore factors that led participants to submit the assignment, or not, and the overall learning experience. A key difference identified in this study was the apparent

level, and form of motivation of participants. According to Ryan and Deci (2000a), social and cultural factors can facilitate or impinge on an individual's perception, and therefore ability, to perform. Key elements or factors that impact on intrinsic motivation include autonomy, competence and relatedness but these must be present simultaneously:

feelings of competence will not enhance intrinsic motivation unless they are accompanied by a sense of autonomy or, in attributional terms, by an internal perceived locus of causality (Ryan and Deci, 2000a: , p.58)

This is particularly relevant to the current study as the sense of autonomy seemed to be felt by all participants, however there was a lack of confidence, or sense of insufficient competence felt by the NSG. This may also be explained by the theory of self-efficacy beliefs which suggests that the quality of function is affected by 'cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes' which leads to how they are able to 'think pessimistically or optimistically, in self-enabling or self-debilitating ways' (Bandura, 2012: , p.13). The apparent development of greater self-efficacy within the SG could be seen as the main positive learning experience for this group.

It is important to note that this Government funded Masters-level project was executed within a tight timeframe, partly due to practical issues relating to the release of funds. This resulted in some practical problems and from the results of the two groups it was clear that some of the students found engagement with Masters-level study a challenge and even stressful. The initial project bid made the assumption that by only engaging with M-level learning the teachers would benefit equally to those who submitted an assignment. The results of this small-scale study suggest otherwise although the reasons for this are varied and this may be an issue of correlation not causation and is worthy of wider and deeper investigation. This has implications for the way in which learning is both designed and delivered as perceptions of quality of provision clearly differed.

Reviewing this research, and the entire project, there is a potential risk that when planning such collaborative projects that there could be negative consequences. For example, participants may end up being *less* engaged and may be discouraged from undertaking Masters-level study than before they had engaged with the project initially. The potential to reduce individual participant's self-efficacy should not be ignored and this is something which is echoed by a recent study into academics and teachers, working on an action research project:

A bungled attempt at collaboration has the potential to drive development backward. (Bevins and Price, 2014: , p.282)

Although this study was not intended to measure the participants' engagement or ability to study at Masters-level this project found a clear distinction between those who had submitted at Masters-level and those who had not. In summary this study suggests clear differences between the SG and NSG when considering level of motivation possibly based on self-efficacy. Therefore, it is proposed that before policy makers or educational programme managers embark on similar future projects they should proceed with caution and be sure that strong partnerships exist and participants are aware of programme aims. This appears to support the suggestion that those leading the professional development of adult learners must have a sound understanding of behavioural, motivational and intellectual elements (Gibson et al., 2017). The management of expectation for participants, and readiness to learn (Knowles et al., 2014), should also be considered and when deciding on teaching content the delivery methods and assessment systems to incorporate the key components of professional development

(attitudinal, intellectual and behavioural) should also be considered. **The subtle differences in motivation and self-efficacy amongst teachers engaging in M-level study should also be considered by those leading the delivery.** A final implication for teachers is that an understanding of their own level of self-efficacy may be vital before deciding to embark on Masters-level learning.

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No potential conflict of interest was declared by the author.

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